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Low skills, high stakes: New insights from the Survey of Adult Skills





What is the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)?

160 000

adults tested

representing
673 million
16–65-year-olds
in 31 countries

3

**domains
assessed**

literacy, numeracy
and adaptive problem
solving

800

**variables
collected**

e.g. education,
employment, skill
use

2nd

**cycle in
2022/2023**

enabling trend
comparison with
Cycle 1 (2012-2018)



What are low foundational skills?

Literacy

Access, understand,
evaluate and reflect on
written texts

Low Literacy:
Achieve Level 1 or below


PIAAC

Unit 1 - Question 1 / 2

Look at the list of preschool rules. Tap on the list to answer the question below.

What is the latest time that children should arrive at preschool?

PRESCHOOL RULES



Welcome to our preschool! We are looking forward to a great year of fun, learning and getting to know each other. Please take a moment to review our preschool rules.

- Please have your child here by 9:00 a.m.
- Dress your child comfortably and bring a change of clothing.
- Please no jewelry or candy. If your child has a birthday, please talk to your child's teacher about a special snack for the children.
- Please bring your child fully dressed – no pajamas.
- Breakfast will be served around 7:30 a.m.
- Bring a small blanket or pillow for naptime. Please leave toys at home.
- Medications have to be in original, labeled containers and must be signed into the medications sheet located in each classroom.
- If you have any questions, please talk to your classroom teacher or to Ms. Marlene.

1

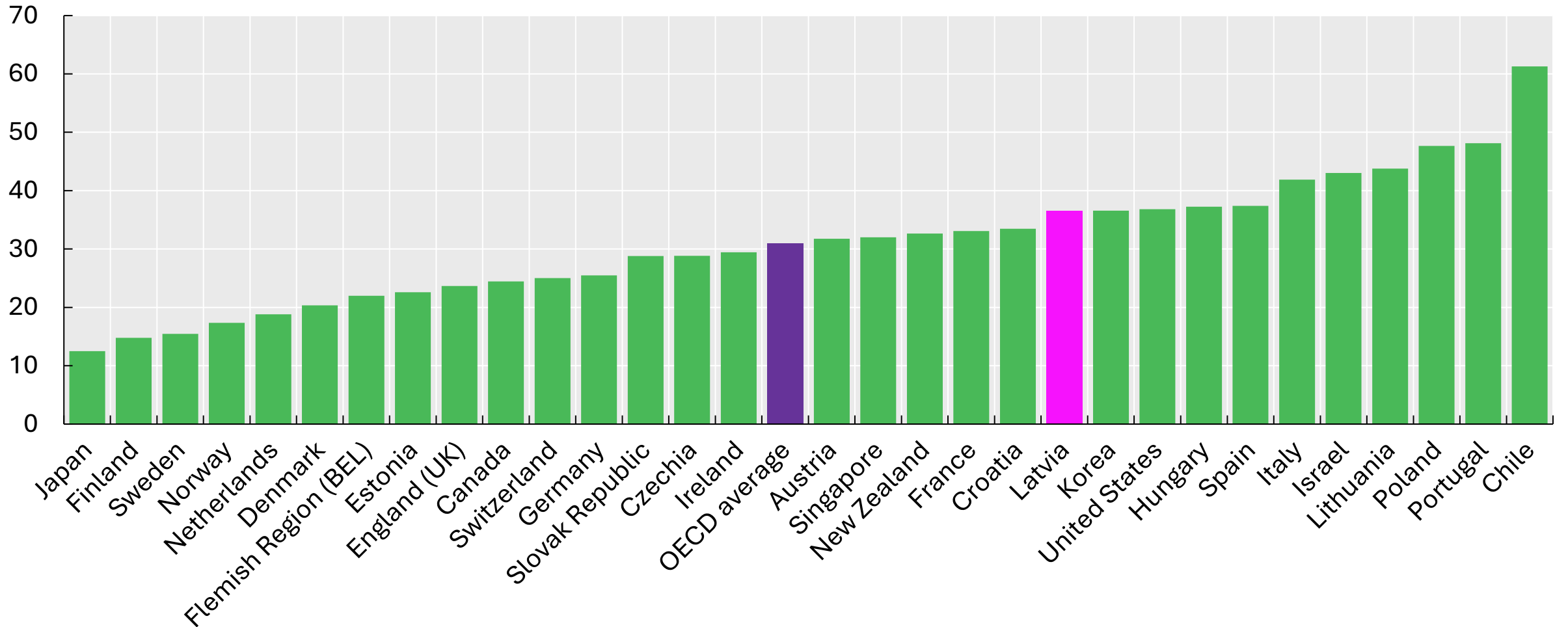
How many adults have low foundational skills and why does it matter?





One in three adults lacks essential skills

Percentage of adults scoring at or below Level 1 in literacy or numeracy, 2023





These skills are the foundation of opportunity



Employment

3 in 10

adults with low foundational skills do not participate in the labour market



Earnings

USD 5

lower hourly wages for adults with low vs. medium foundational skills

More than USD 10 in Singapore and Switzerland



Well-being

Worse health outcomes, lower life satisfaction



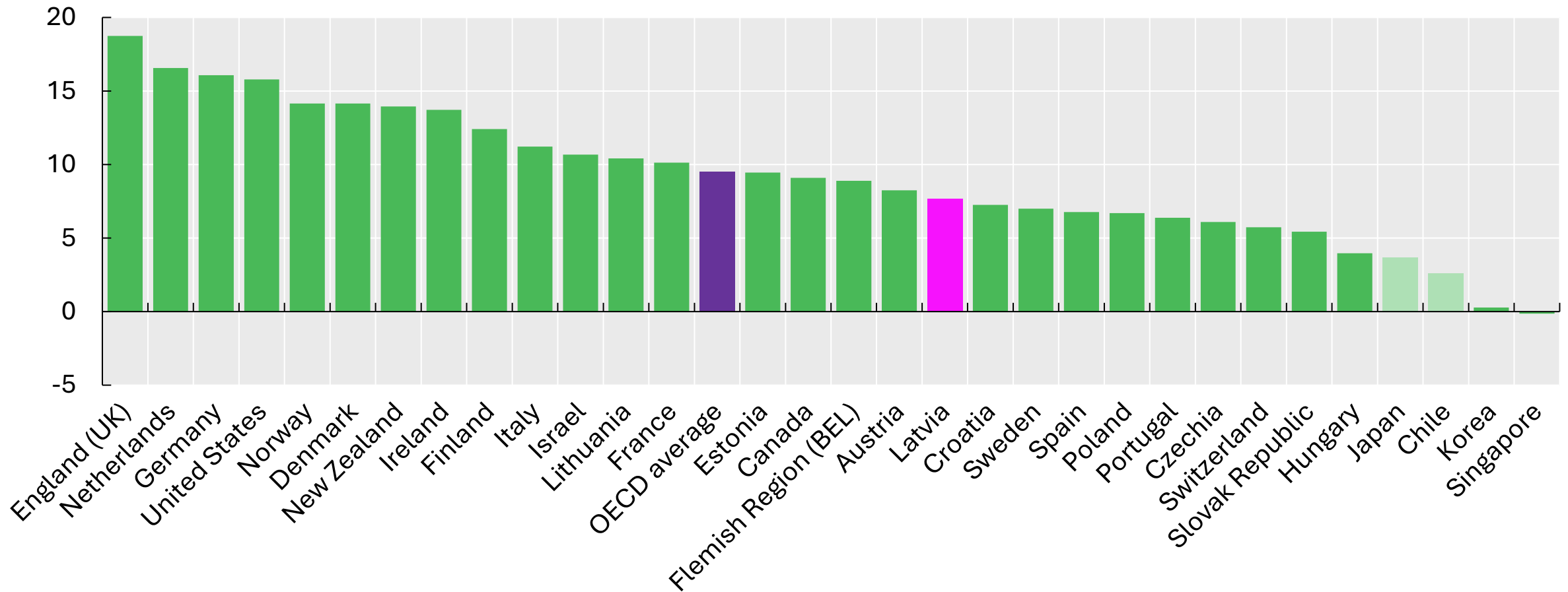
Civic Life

Lower trust in institutions, less likely to feel able to influence political processes (although not everywhere)



Adults with low skills are far more likely to be inactive...

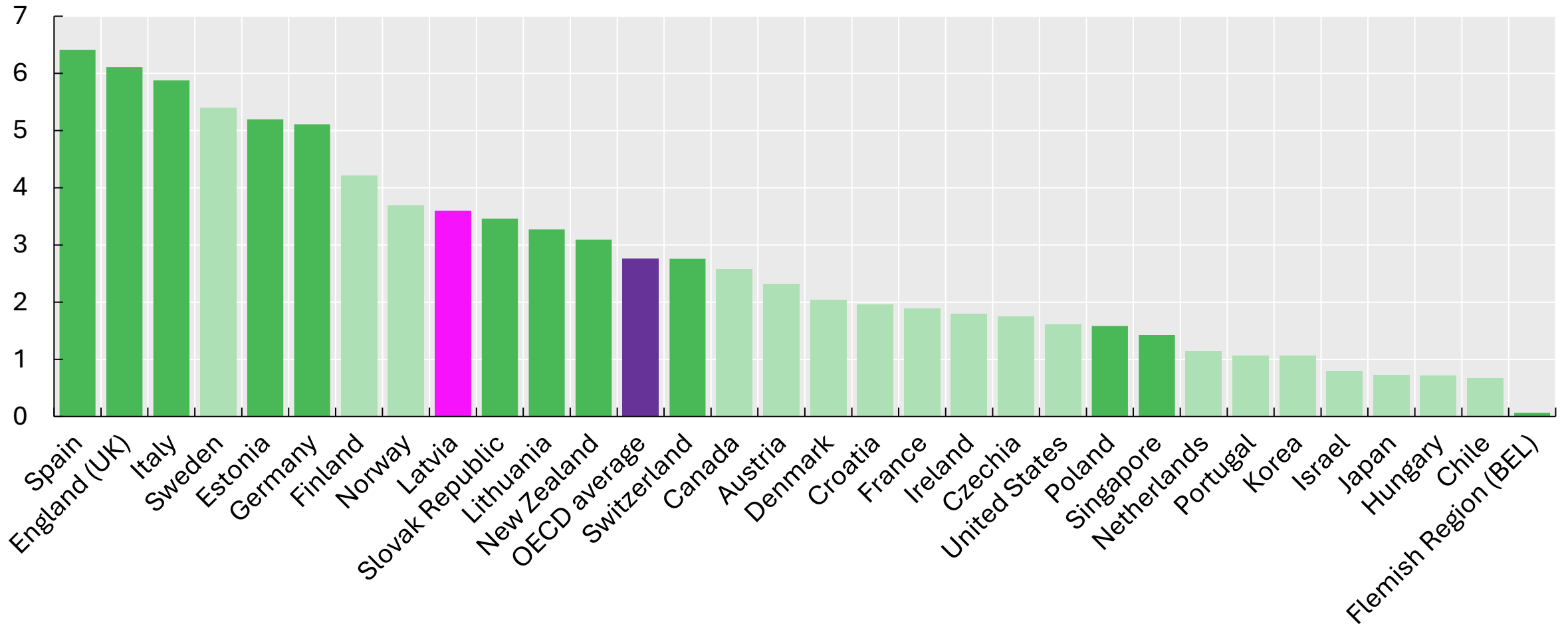
Adjusted percentage point difference in inactivity rates:
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





...but they are not more likely to be unemployed everywhere.

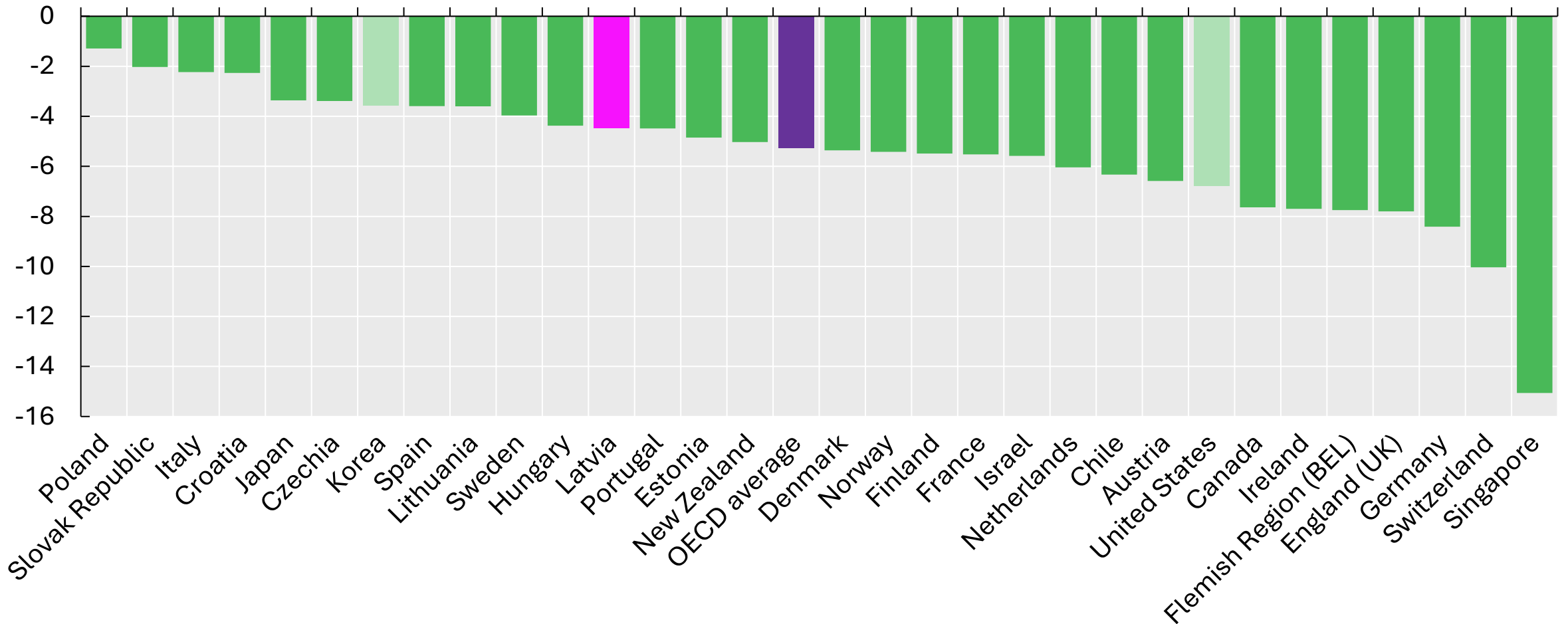
Adjusted percentage point difference in unemployment rates:
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





The low-skill wage penalty exceeds USD 10/hour in some countries.

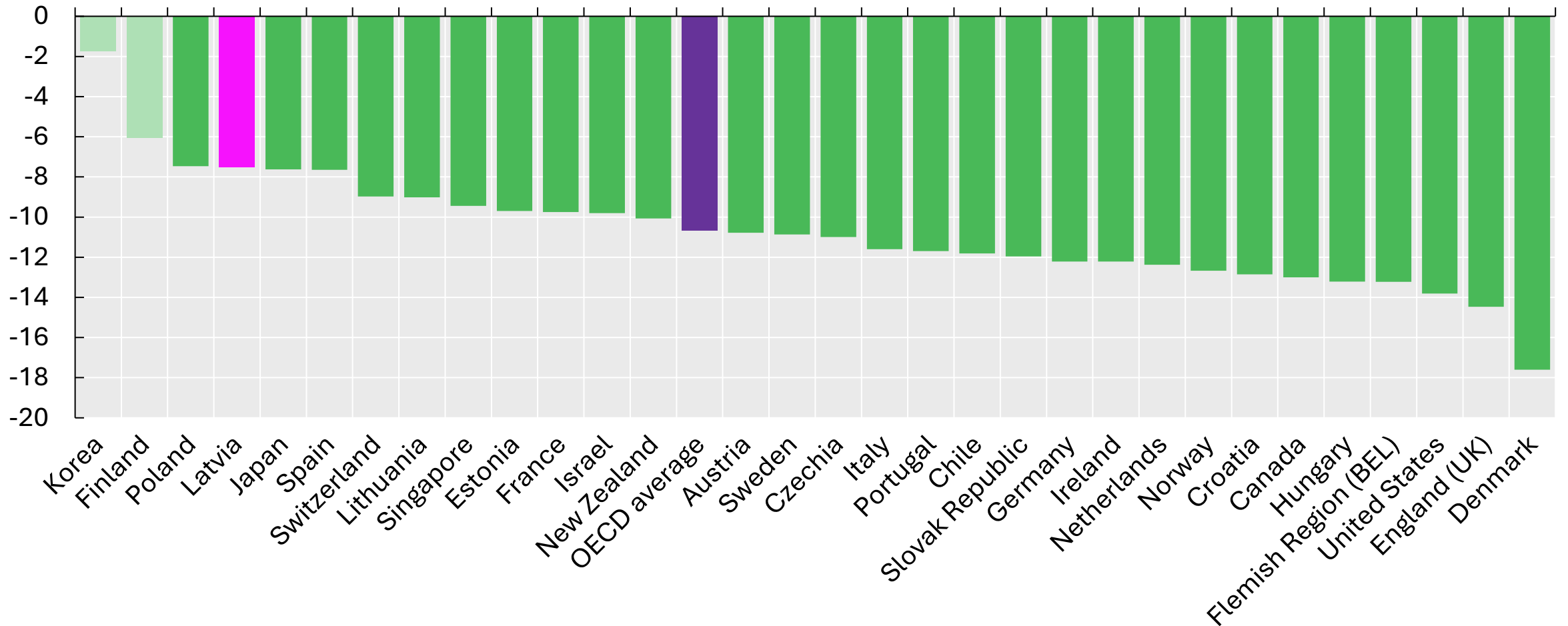
Adjusted difference in hourly wages (USD PPP):
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





Adults with low skills report worse health nearly everywhere...

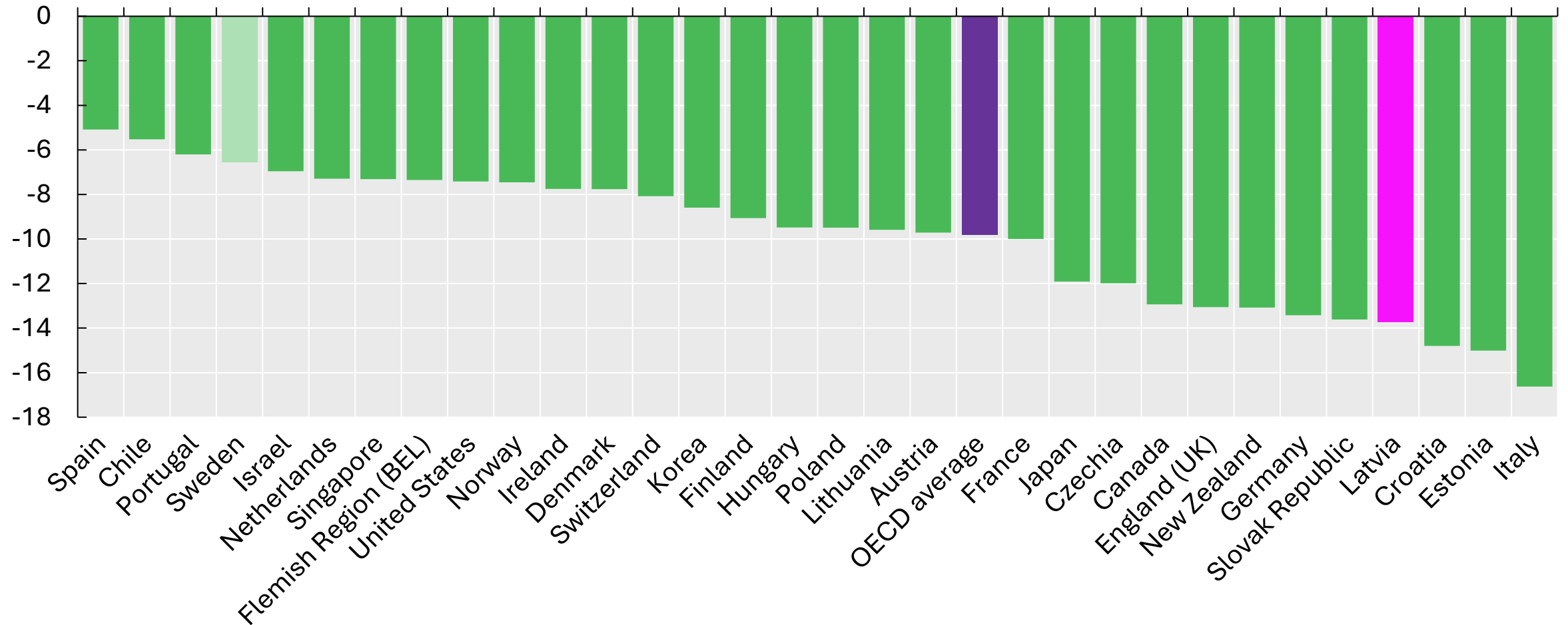
Adjusted percentage point difference in reporting excellent or very good health:
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





...a pattern that holds for life satisfaction.

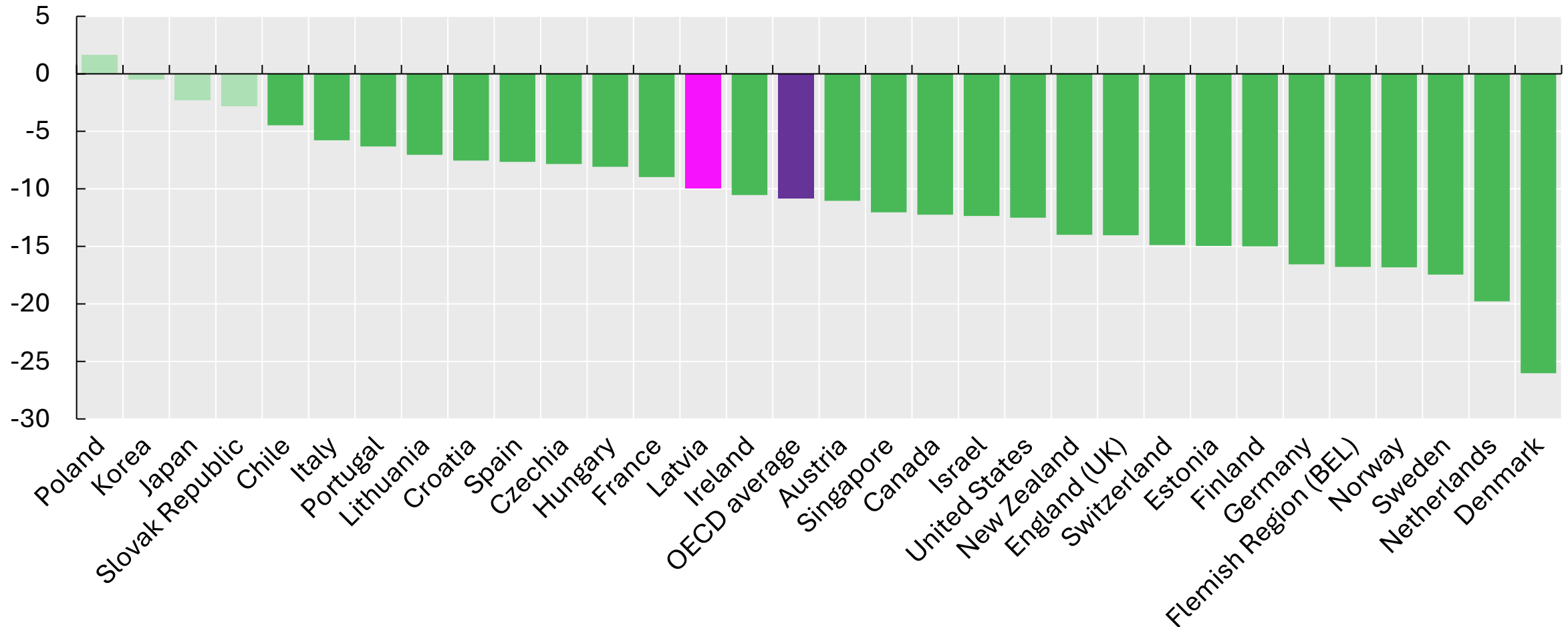
Adjusted percentage point difference in reporting high life satisfaction:
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





Low foundational skills are associated with lower interpersonal trust...

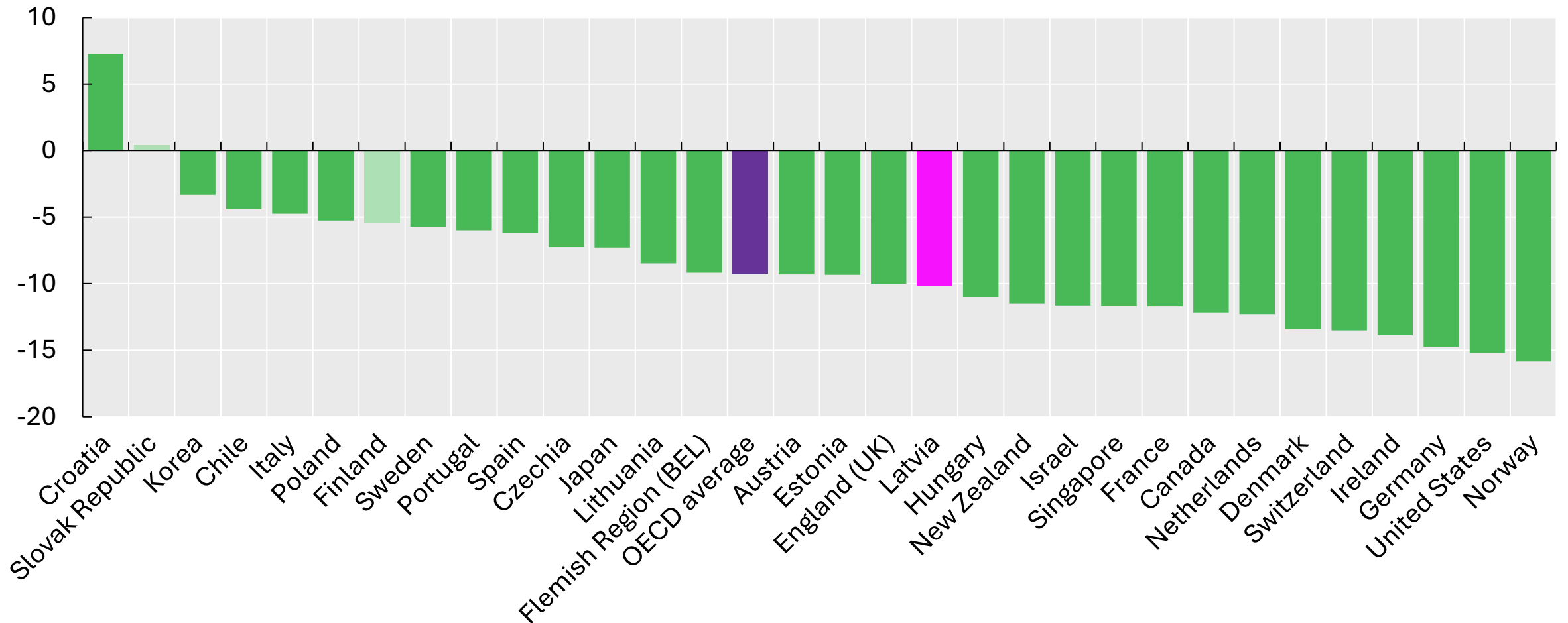
Adjusted percentage point difference in reporting high interpersonal trust:
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





...and lower participation in volunteering in most countries...

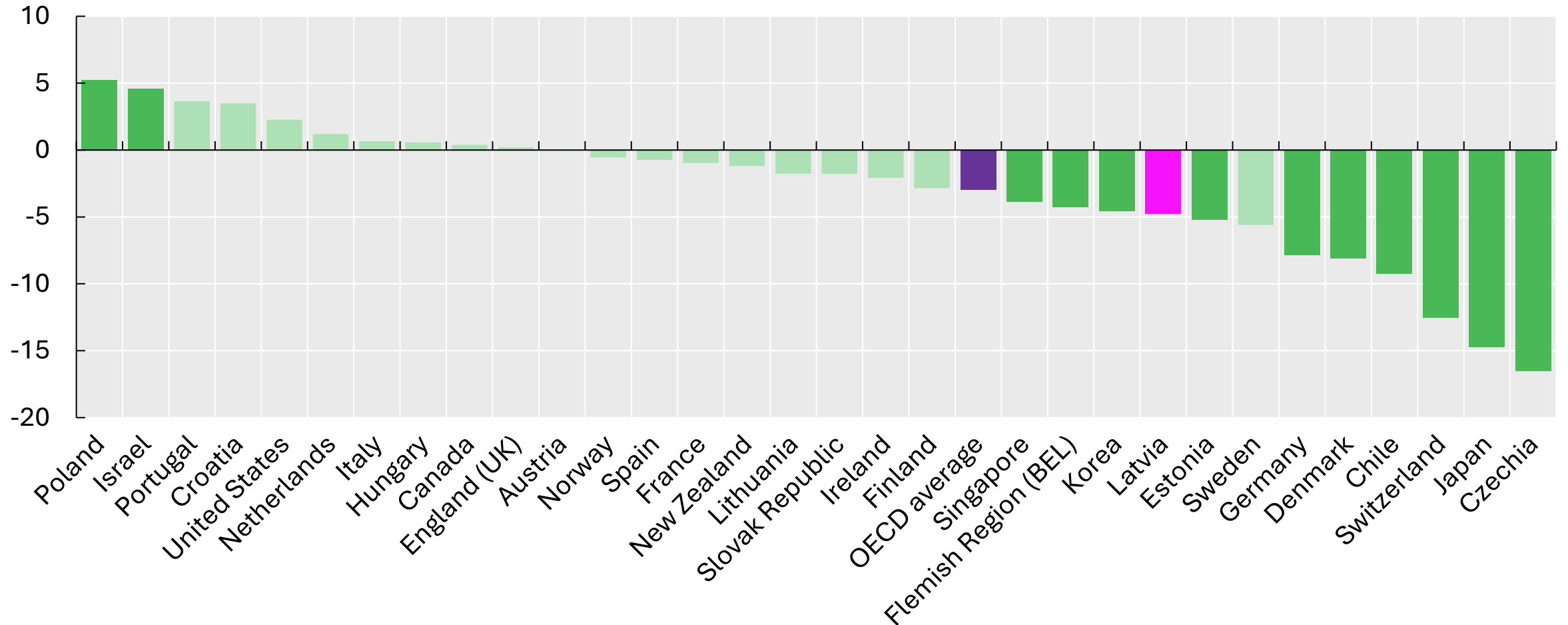
Adjusted percentage point difference in reporting participation in volunteering:
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





...but not always with lower political efficacy.

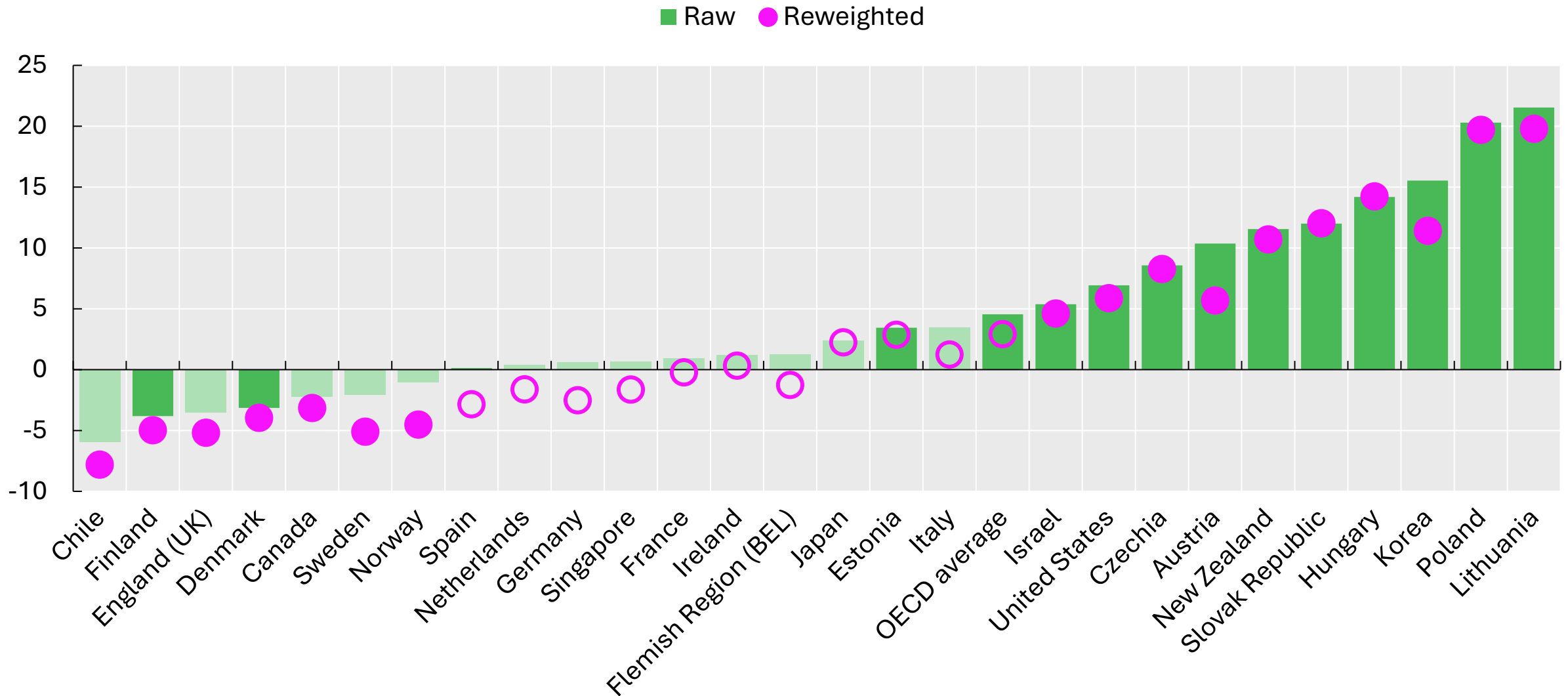
Adjusted percentage point difference in reporting high political efficacy:
low versus medium foundational skills, 2023





Progress is stalling – in many cases reversing

Change in share of adults scoring at or below Level 1 in literacy or numeracy, Cycle 1 and Cycle 2



2

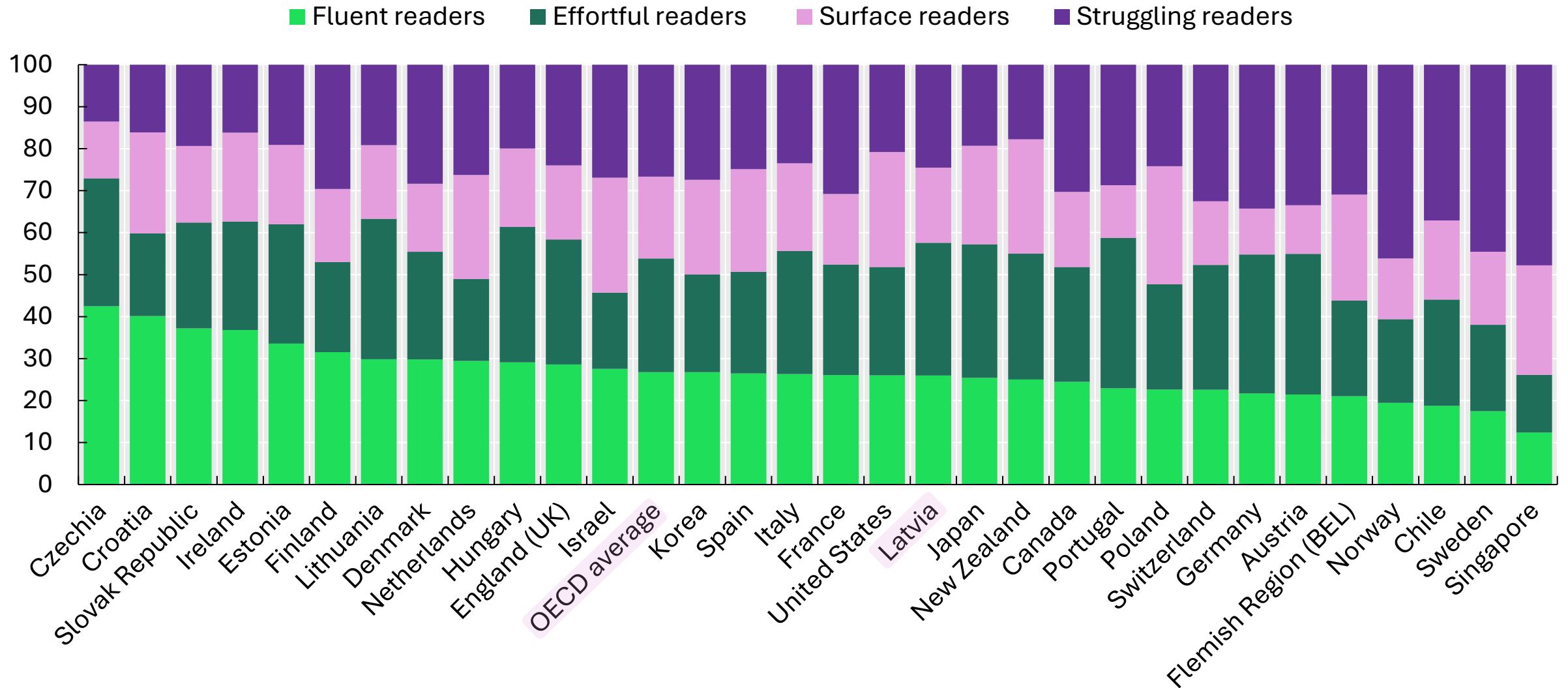
Who has low foundational skills?





Adult with low foundational skills are not a homogenous group

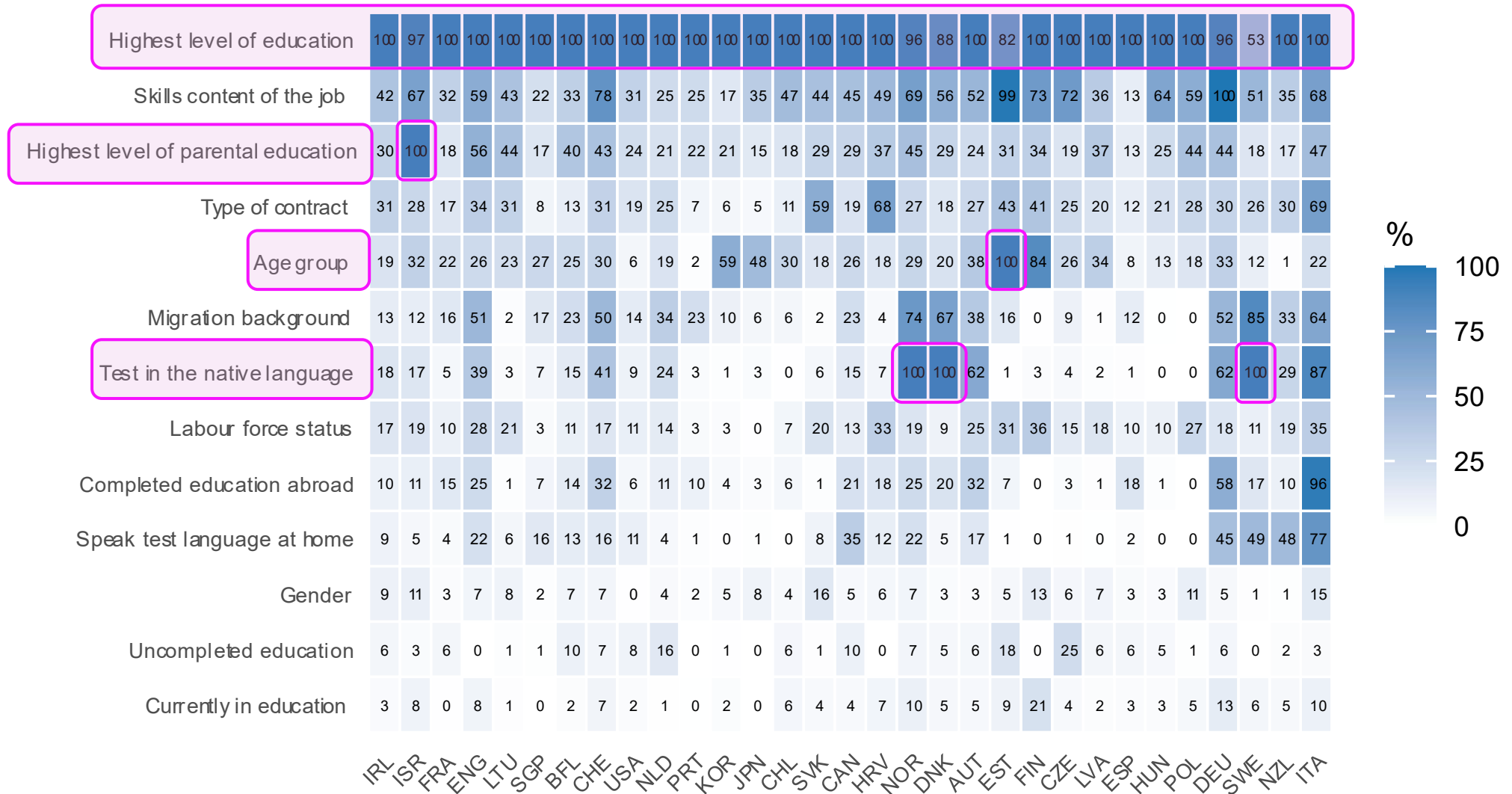
Share of adults with low foundational skills by reader profile, by country, 2023





Low education is the strongest predictor of low skills

Relative importance of variables to predict low skills

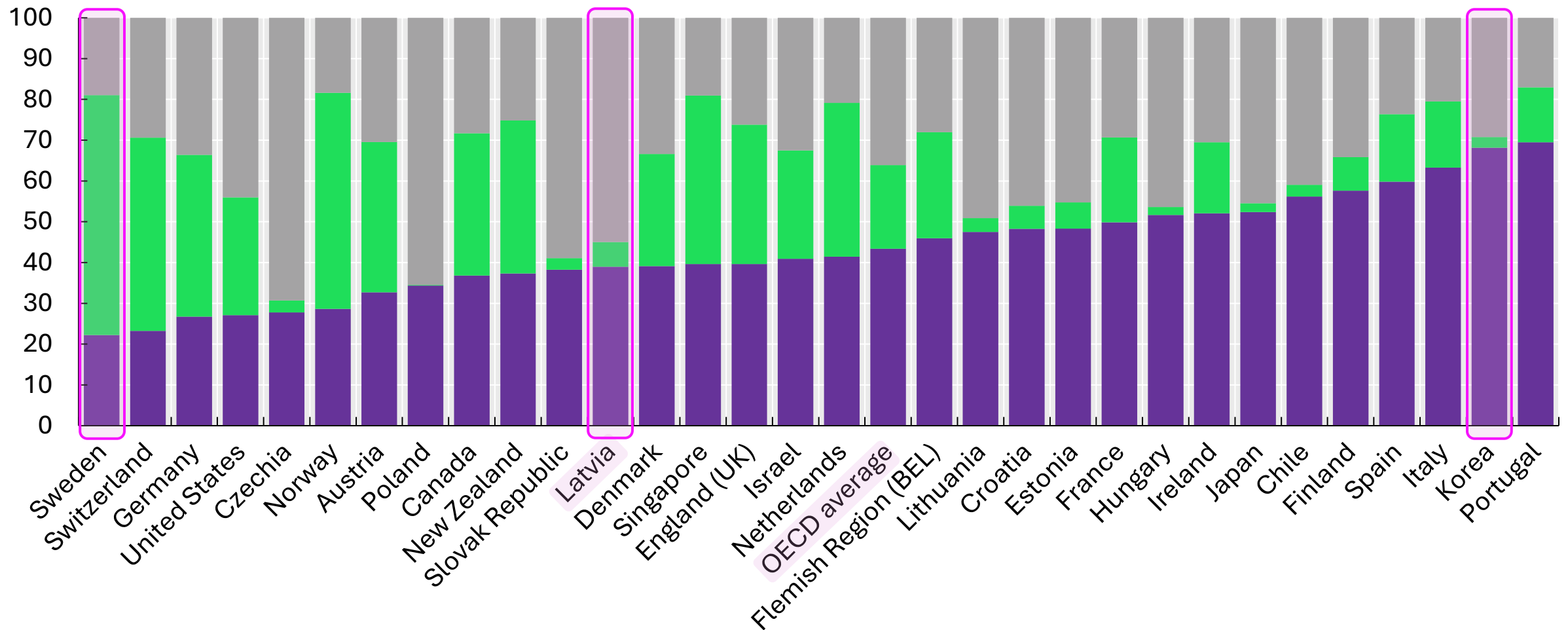




But there is no single 'low-skilled profile'

Distribution of three distinct profiles of adults with low foundational skills across countries

■ Older natives from low-education families ■ Migrants with language barriers ■ Unexpected underperformers



What can policy do now?





Four country profiles, four policy logics

Near-threshold countries

Canada, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden

Population clustered just below medium proficiency and relatively homogenous. Well-targeted short-course upskilling is a viable policy lever.

Literacy gap countries

Austria, Latvia, Norway, Singapore, Switzerland

Primarily a language integration challenge. Rapid, sustained language acquisition support for migrants and language minorities is the highest-return investment.

Deep deficit countries

Chile, Denmark, Finland, Flemish Region (BE), France, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, Portugal

Population further from medium proficiency and more internally diverse. Provision must be intensive, long-duration, and embedded in an educational equity agenda.

Numeracy gap countries

England (UK), New Zealand, United States

Challenge likely originates upstream in compulsory mathematics education. Adult provision helps at the margins, but high quality and equitable initial education is key.